



*I*t was raining, but I was walking fast and barely noticed the nuisance – my mind was somewhere else. I'd just lost my last hundred bucks to a lucky bastard that drew a seven of diamonds to an inside straight flush. That draw made the three Jacks I was holding look like something left over from a gin rummy game.

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*S*everal lights were still burning inside *Angel's Crab Bar*, so I stepped in from the rain to see if I could get a drink before 'last call'. *Angel's* was a strange and quaint little bar located in a remote alley just off Second Street in South Beach. Far enough away from the crowds and tourists, *Angel's Crab Bar* was a perfect place for the locals to hang out – like me.



As usual at this hour of the evening the place was empty. Well, empty except for my friends Angel and Bart, her drunken parrot who spent his days (and nights) sitting at the end of the bar squawking and sipping on his preferred libation of Rum and beer.

If Angel wasn't strange enough herself, that mumbling bird made up the difference. According to her, the parrot was left as security for an overdue bar tab, and the owner never came back to claim his pet.

Bart had a small perch at the end of the counter where he would sit, squawk meaninglessly and sip on Rum and beer from a shot glass. Of course, most customers felt obligated to encourage Bart's drinking habit and never left the joint without dropping a dollar or two on the counter to buy him another shot. And that damn drunken parrot could definitely hold his liquor – as witnessed by the stack of dollar bills resting under that perch and next to his shot glass. However, he did sometimes surrender to the alcohol, close his eyes, roll over on his back and lay on the counter. Fortunately these were only short naps. Bart would quickly recover, return to his perch, continue squawking and sip on his drink – all to the delight and entertainment of Angel's customers.

In fact, I think Angel made more money off that damn bird than she did from regular business!

On occasion Bart would ignore his libation, hop up and down the bar counter, flap useless wings and mumble the same unintelligible phrase over and over again. He was, of course drunk - but nobody seemed to care. Angel claimed his squawking was words to a song, which nobody seemed to recognize. To me it sounded like he was telling everyone to 'kiss my ass' - but who am I to argue with a drunk bird and a midget.

The midget was Angel, who only measured three foot four inches – top to bottom. While tending bar she overcame that handicap by standing on plastic milk cartons, neatly placed behind the counter. In fact, if you didn't see the milk cartons or her someplace besides behind the bar, you wouldn't know she was a midget. It seemed that most of her other features, womanly ones included, had managed to reach the growth of a normal person. However, it did make for an awkward sight when she stepped down from those milk cartons and came from around the counter – arms almost dragging the ground and tits hanging below her waist.

The faded and framed liquor license that hung behind the counter announced that Marion Elizabeth Anna-Marie Daphine had been issued the license and was authorized to serve alcohol at this location. I guess with a handle like that it was easy to understand why everyone just called her Angel.

And then there was the name of the joint - *Angel's Crab Bar*. I suspect Angel had never seen a real crab, and I certainly never saw one being served there or anywhere near the place! The menu (written on a chalk board next to the entrance door) was limited to beer, alcohol and hamburgers - which you could dress-up with cheese and pickles for another nickel. A limited breakfast was offered only on weekdays – but not on the weekends. The breakfast cook (Angel's son) was a surfer and never available on Saturdays or Sundays. So, in addition to handling the bar, Angel reluctantly cooked hamburgers on the weekends – provided she was in the right mood. Otherwise, customers were advised to make other dining arrangements.

That's it...nothing else, and certainly no mention of crabs.

However, I suspect a bar of any kind in south Florida which served food, and wanted to be successful should have some sort of seafood mentioned...somewhere - whether it was actually served or not. Thus we have...*Angel's Crab Bar*.

Angel's son, Eugene operated the kitchen – when he wasn't off surfing or chasing girls. He was a likeable enough fellow, I guess. And his six foot frame and bulging muscles would certainly have made him a popular attraction on the beach. However, with her small size I just can't imagine Angel giving birth – and certainly not to someone the size of Eugene. God certainly acts in strange ways.

Angel never mentioned a husband (if one ever existed) and I definitely never asked. It was none of my business.

As I mentioned before – *Angel's Crab Bar* was a strange place. But Angel was a friend, and most of the time I needed all the friends I could get.

“We’re closed,” Angel barked when I stepped in out of the rain. “And why don’t you get yourself an umbrella, or at least wear a hat. You look like you just stepped out of the shower, and that blonde curly hair ain’t very pretty when it’s wet.”

“Sorry Angel, but your lights were still on and I thought maybe I could get a shot of whiskey before you locked up for the day.”

“Barry Malone...you know damn well that two o’clock is closin’ time, and it’s already almost two-thirty. Get outta’ here and go home where you belong. We’ll be open again in the mornin’.”

“Don’t call me that,” I snapped.

“Call you what?” Angel frowned at me.

“Barry...you know I don’t like being called Barry.”

“Well,” Angel cocked her head to one side, “ain’t that the name your mother gave you?”

“Yes, but she didn’t get my approval. If she’d asked I would have picked something different.”

“Humph,” Angel snorted.

“Just call me Malone – like everybody else.”

“Okay Malone, I’ll get you that shot of whiskey. You do look like you could use it. Have the horses been treating you that bad?”

“Angel, I quit the horses – nothing but poker for me from now on. If I’m going to give my money away, I’m going to look at whose taking it and look them in the eye when I do. You ever looked a horse in the eye?”

“No, and I don’t intend to,” the counter and chuckled. have enough milk cartons to get



Angel slid my drink across “Besides, I probably don’t up that high.”

She had a point, and evidently

Bart agreed.

“Kiss my ass,” the parrot screeched, while Angel was still laughing at herself. I gave him a salute with my fresh drink. He returned the salute by taking a sip of Rum and beer from his shot glass.

“Why don’t you put that bird out of his misery...or at least turn him loose to go play with other parrots? Getting him out of this bar might be a good cure for his drinking habit.”

“I’ve told you that I’m holding Bart for his owner...holding him for an unpaid bar tab.”

“Yeah I know, but how long has that been?”

“A couple of years...I think – probably longer. But, what if the guy shows up with money and wants his parrot back? I couldn’t tell him I just turned this poor creature ah’ loose. Besides, I’m not sure if an alcoholic parrot could properly care for himself – out in the world with other parrots...sober ones I mean. Him being handicapped with a drinking habit you know. Handicapped like me, just in a different way.”

“Polly want a cracker,” Bart squawked.

I looked at Bart and then back at Angel. “Wait a minute,” I exclaimed. “Did I just hear that parrot call himself Polly and ask for a cracker?”

“Yeah,” Angel snickered. “He does that sometimes – usually when he’s had too much to drink.”

“Did you name him Bart or did he come with that name?”

“I don’t know the damn bird’s real name,” she blurted. “The owner didn’t bother to share that with me before he disappeared. He’s named Bart because that’s the name of the guy who left him here along with an unpaid bar bill.”

I glanced at Bart again, then back at Angel. “But...but what if Bart is actually...actually a girl parrot...a girl parrot named Polly?”

Angel glared at me over her small frame glasses. “How the hell would I know? Have you ever tried to ‘sex check’ a parrot...and especially one who stays drunk all the time?”

I continued to look at Angel without comment.

“Well...I haven’t and I’m not going to try! Besides, I wouldn’t even know what to look for if I did. The parrot is named Bart, and I could care less if it’s a boy Bart or a girl Bart. Understand?”

“Kiss my ass,” Bart squawked before getting another sip of Rum and beer.

“See,” Angel nodded. “He’s back to normal. He probably knows we’re talking about him.”

“Here’s to Bart,” I saluted him again with my drink. “Be they a boy parrot or a girl parrot – it really doesn’t matter.”

“Exactly,” Angel nodded again.

I knew it was time to change the subject. “Angel, you and your handicap seem to be getting along just fine.” I took a sip from my drink. “I’m proud of you...my friend.”

I think my comment embarrassed her. She wiped the counter with a small towel she'd been holding, looked up at me and smiled. "You just don't know how tough it is Mr. Barry Malone, you just don't know."

I nodded and returned her smile before speaking. "Well Angel...what I do know is that I'll need to find you another parrot to cover my bar tab. The cards weren't good to me tonight and I'm busted. So, you'll need to add this drink on there too...sorry."

"Nope, your tab has been taken care of. It must be nice to have friends looking after your debts."

"Angel...what are you talking about? Somebody show up here and pay my bar tab?"

"A fellow stopped by here this afternoon looking for you. I told him I hadn't seen you in a few days, and that when I did you owed me twenty bucks. He dropped thirty dollars on the counter and said 'keep the change'. So...me and you are square, and I guess I'll throw the one you're drinking in there too. That way we can start over with a clean slate."

"Wait a minute...a fellow...who was this fellow? Did he leave a name or say why he was looking for me?"

"Nope, no name and no message – just the thirty bucks...a nice crisp twenty and ten dollar bill."

I sipped my drink and thought for a moment. "What did this guy look like? I mean...did he say why he was paying my bar tab?"

"I told you, no name and no message."

"Okay, but what did the guy look like? Have you ever seen him before?"

"Nope, and if I had I would have remembered. The guy was one you wouldn't easily forget. The kinda' guy that when you did meet him - you were glad you hadn't met him before. And after you met him, you hoped to never meet him again."

"What the hell does all that mean?" I slid my empty glass across the counter, hoping my new found credit was good for a refill.

Angel continued to talk while pouring me another shot of whiskey. "A big ugly fellow, dressed in a suit that cost more than my car and a brown Fedora hat pulled down on his forehead. He talked with a sheepish grin on his face and had a burning unfiltered cigarette hanging from his lips, which he never removed. If he's a friend of yours I hope you never bring him back in here. Scared the shit outta' me and Bart too – I could tell."

"Kiss my ass," Bart squawked.

"Eddie Dane," I muttered to myself, "Why would Eddie Dane be paying my bar tab?"

“You’ll need to ask him,” Angel set a fresh drink down in front of me, “but do it somewhere else. I don’t want to see the guy again – he had trouble written all over him.”

“Hmm,” I muttered, still wondering why Eddie Dane would be down on Second Street and paying my bar tab.

“Where do you meet these people? I mean, the kind of people like this...this whoever it was that came in here looking for you. Is he a friend of yours?”

“His name is Eddie Dane, and no, I wouldn’t call him a friend. He works for a fellow named Nick Ferraro – who I also wouldn’t call a friend.”

“What does he do for your ‘non-friend’ Nick Ferraro?”

“He’s a...well he’s what I call a ‘fixer’ - someone who does all the heavy lifting for Ferraro. Nick Ferraro doesn’t like to do heavy lifting or get his hands dirty.”

“I think I understand,” Angel grinned. “Do you owe him money...I mean either Eddie Dane or Nick Ferraro?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“But you’re not sure...right?”

“Look Angel, I owe a lot of people a lot of money, and they all get paid when I get paid. But...Nick Ferraro and Eddie Dane are not the kind of guys you’ll ever owe money to – or at least not for very long.”

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I slid my empty glass across the counter, waved at Bart and walked back out into the rain. Fortunately my apartment was just a couple of blocks away, and I dodged the puddles trying to stay as dry as possible.

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*M*y apartment wasn’t really an apartment - actually it was a twenty-five dollar a week room at the *Cortez Hotel* on Ninth Avenue. It wasn’t fancy; in fact I’m not even sure the hotel had a sign on the street advertising its location. But I got maid service twice a week, clean sheets and towels, and the place was sanitary...sorta’. Plus the manager, Lester, would let me slide on the rent for a couple of weeks if my luck was running in the wrong direction – which it usually was.

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Shaking the rain out of my hair while walking up the back steps to my second floor room, I was in deep thought. Eddie Dane paying my bar tab was disturbing, but not as disturbing as that bastard drawing out on an inside straight flush. My bad luck was everywhere, and I was pretty sure that getting my bar tab paid would somehow fall into that same category...unlucky.

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Then there was the 'ex' part of my life. 'Ex' was in front of everything I was about. Ex-football player, ex-cop, ex-detective and now maybe it should be ex-gambler. This past week had been a bad one...in fact - so had the past month, and maybe even the past year. So far 1958 had not been a good one for Barry Malone. But of course...neither had many of the years before this one.

A football scholarship from Baton Rouge High School had sent me to LSU. The professional football draft was within my reach when some asshole from Ole Miss broke my leg on a meaningless play that I shouldn't have even been involved in. A short career with the *Miami Police Department* ended when I slugged a 'nobody' for abusing a local hooker. "Conduct Unbecoming" was the label they attached to my termination papers.

Detective work didn't pan-out either; it seemed that most of my clients (women) weren't actually interested in my investigative services - just 'other' services. So, to pay my rent and eat occasionally I took up gambling. But, without some luck coming my way - that will soon be added to the 'ex' category too.

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I latched the door, dropped my jacket on the bed, turned on the single table lamp and looked at the discolored and rusty refrigerator Lester had confiscated from a nearby alley. Amenities' at the *Cortez Hotel* were thin (non-existent really), and obviously didn't include a refrigerator in the room, but having Lester as a friend was a positive I could not ignore.

The old yellow machine wasn't compressor made a grinding noise minute. But, it was handy and kept and nights. This day and night

Unfortunately, when I opened the looked back at me was a dim light and Daniel's. Jack and I sat down on the



pretty, and the loud like it might explode at any things cool on warm days qualified.

refrigerator door, all that a half empty bottle of Jack bed for a nightcap.

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I had just removed the top and was taking my first swallow when someone knocked on the door – a light knock, as if the person requesting me to answer knew I was inside. But the unwanted interruption was both annoying and disturbing, and I’m not sure which was worse. Either way, I didn’t want company at this time of night.

The small wind-up clock sitting next to the bed (which Lester had also confiscated) told me it was 3:45 AM – much too late for visitors.

“Go away,” I shouted at the closed door – assuming it was a late night hooker who had watched me walk home. “I don’t need any, don’t want any and can’t afford any. Come back when my luck changes – I’ll leave you a note.”

“Open the door Malone,” I heard in a rough voice. “It’s me Dane...Eddie Dane. We need to talk.”

I stared at the door for a few moments before responding. Eddie Dane wanting to talk to me at this hour was not good. I wanted him to go away. “If you’re looking for repayment of the bar tab, forget it. I appreciate the gesture, but I didn’t ask you to do it. A seven of diamonds left me holding a loser. I’m tapped out...no money...go away.”

“It ain’t that, Malone. Open the door we need to talk, I’ve got a proposition for you. A proposition with money attached...you interested?”

A proposition...yeah a proposition, I bet he did. Whatever he was selling, I wasn’t buying – this guy never brought good news. But, considering my current financial situation and him offering a proposition with money attached, I probably ought to at least hear what he had to say – don’t you think?

I wish I hadn’t.

After returning Jack to the refrigerator, I stepped over to the door, removed the latch and swung it open. Ugly Eddie Dane gave me a big smile before pushing his big right fist into my jaw.

While I was tumbling over the bed and slamming into the wall, Eddie Dane walked in and plopped his big ass in my only chair. He was still grinning.

“What the fuck was that for?” I said, struggling to get up while rubbing my chin and making sure my face was still in one piece. “I thought you said you had a proposition...is that the way you negotiate?”



“Not negotiating, I just needed to make sure I had your attention.” Dane retrieved a crushed pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, removed the last one, lit it, waded up the empty pack and tossed it across the room.

I somehow managed to speak, while getting up from the floor and walking around to where he was sitting. “Okay...okay, you’ve got my attention. What happens next – you gonna’ hit me again? If you are I’d appreciate you letting me know so I can at least try to defend myself.”

Eddie Dane laughed, reached into his inside coat pocket, removed a thick white envelope and tossed it on the bed. I looked at it, sat down next to it and then looked at him.

“What’s that?”

“5 G’s and there’s five more when the job is done.”

I picked up the envelope, thumbed through the hundred dollar bills and then returned it to the bed.

“Who does Nick Ferraro want dead and why come to me? You know I don’t do that kind of work. Besides, if he wants somebody to take a dirt nap he can get it done a lot cheaper than ten thousand dollars. I know some folks over on Collins Avenue that will do it for ten dollars!”

“It’s not like that Malone, it’s nothing like that - we just want to buy your time for a few days. That’s all that’s required, there’s no muscle needed. And don’t tell me you couldn’t use the money.”

I looked back at the envelope before answering. “Okay Dane, you’re right - I could use the money. But I don’t trust you or Nick Ferraro. However...I am listening. What’s the proposition?”

“I need you to look out after someone for a few days – that’s all. Just follow instructions, keep your mouth shut, don’t ask questions and you’ll be well paid.”

“What does ‘look out after’ mean? Show them the town, buy them dinner, get them laid, get them drunk...is this a babysitting job? If so, I don’t think I’m interested...and probably not qualified.”

“You mean you’re not interested in making ten grand?”

I glanced at the envelope again and figured I would regret my next comment. But...money talks, so I made it anyway. “Okay, who is this person I would be looking after, and why do they need looking after?”

“There you go, asking questions when I told you not to.”

“Well...you’ve got to tell me something...sometime.”

He stared at me for a moment, crushed his cigarette out on the floor and stood up. “It’s a friend of a friend – one of Nick’s friends. They will be arriving in Miami tomorrow and I need you to watch over them until you get further instructions.”

“What does ‘watch over’ and ‘look out after’ mean? You’re not telling me much.”

“And you’re still asking questions, like I told you not too.”

“Dane...I don’t even have a car. Why are you coming to me with this deal? How am I supposed to ‘take care of’ or ‘look out after’ anybody?”

He ignored my comment. “Albert Johnson will pick you up here tomorrow afternoon at five o’clock, that’s five o’clock sharp. You’ll both drive down to a little airport runway north of Everglades City and pick-up the person I need you to look after. Albert will have more instructions when you see him.”

“You mean Albert ‘Drop’ Johnson...the guy who hasn’t had a bath since they overturned prohibition? No thanks, I’ll pass.”

“Malone, don’t fret the small stuff; I’ll make sure Drop gets himself cleaned up for your little errand. Maybe I can even find some sweet cologne for him to wear too.”

“Drop is an idiot...and a dirty idiot. I don’t/can’t work with that fool. Find yourself another stooge; in fact, just let him handle it without me. I like that better.”

“Sorry Malone that is not an option. You’ll do what you’re being paid to do.”

“Dane, what do you need me for? Why can’t Drop handle your little ‘baby-sitting’ task? I mean...why include me?”

Dane walked past me before looking down at the envelope and answering both my questions. “You mean you don’t you want the money? And even if you don’t it really doesn’t matter. Nick wants you involved...personally. Involved whether you take the money or not. I think he likes you.”

“Bullshit,” I mumbled, watching Dane open the door. Then I shouted, “When do I get the rest of this...this ‘proposition’ money?”

“When your job is done,” he answered frankly. “Drop will be here tomorrow afternoon at five o’clock sharp, make sure you are ready and don’t be late. And if you decide to take that envelope and disappear...please think it over first. That would not make Nick happy.”

I gave him a hard stare, but didn't speak. Taking the money and disappearing was DEFINITELY on my mind.

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*E*ddie Dane closed the door behind him and left. Mr. Jack Daniel's and I sat down on the bed and more closely examined the contents of the envelope he had left.

It contained five thousand dollars in new crisp one hundred dollar bills. I didn't like the set-up, but did need the money. Lester had been floating me for a couple of weeks and I still owed the bookie for a half dozen slow running horses. This would get me square with everyone, and also a good stake in trying to get my money back from that lucky bastard with the seven of diamonds.

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*T*here was a permanent poker game behind a pool room next to *Flamingo Park* – not big stakes but enough to keep everything interesting. I just might give that a try before my appointment with Albert 'Drop' Johnson in the afternoon. Those crisp one hundred dollar bills were just crying out for attention!

Jack and I went to sleep together.